

Race in the U.K.

There is an enormous culture of people of all shades and all skin tones and ethnicities who stand together against racism, who get along with each other and who have never been racist, xenophobic or bigoted on issues of diversity.

Then there are the other ones. The idiots who are continually trying to stir up trouble. Some of these idiots think that they can gain some political advantage by stirring up trouble and some of them are just filled with hatred and animosity without any particular agenda.

I was born in the 1950s. When I was three years old a black, Afro-Caribbean woman who was a midwife came to our house to deliver my little sister. She may have been the first black woman I had ever seen but I don't remember being at all surprised so I had probably seen black people before. While the birth was taking place I was put into the midwife's shiny little black car, the type of car which was made in the 1940s but still driven in the 50s. I was given a bar of Cadbury's Dairy Milk Chocolate, the one penny (1d) bars which they used to make in those days. I sat there happily eating the chocolate and looking at the inside of the car. I had never been in a motor car before.

When the baby was born they came and got me from the car and told me I had a new baby sister. The midwife was a very nice friendly woman. I had no reason, at the age of three, to be aware that anyone could possibly feel hatred at another human being over some minor difference of physical appearance, skin tone or body.

I grew up through the 1960s at Sutton in Surrey. We were close to London and so we had red London Transport buses. Green ones in some areas too. The majority of black people we saw on a regular basis were working on the buses and the trains. Asian people, on the other hand, tended to mostly be either doctors, dentists or restaurant owners.

We saw black actors and musicians, British and American on television. We became aware of the bad words, the insults that some people used toward different races. My mum was Irish and my dad was Scottish Canadian so we also had to put up with the insult jokes and remarks. Being half Irish apparently meant that I was supposed to be mentally sub-normal and being part Scottish apparently meant that I was supposed to be stingy with money. Being Canadian meant that I was a lumberjack who always ate pancakes with maple syrup and being English by birth meant.... what? An upper class twit in a bowler hat? None of these stereotypes made any sense at all.

I went to Methodist Church Sunday School and, when I was fourteen, discovered that Christianity wasn't the only religion in the world. I began to be interested in Buddhism and also I was curious about The Beatles' journey to India and what they had learned there. They clearly needed to learn something because their movie "Help!" had white actors Leo McKern and Eleanor Bron performing in brownface!

In those days BBC Television still showed "The Black and White Minstrel Show", which was white singers in black face makeup singing Stephen Foster and Al Jolson type of songs. We hated that show but we hated it for the wrong reasons.

We hated the Black and White Minstrels because they were boring and old fashioned. The wearing of black makeup on TV was weird but I wasn't old enough yet to figure out what was wrong about it. It just seemed boring and "yucky". The BBC had ridiculous double standards. They invited Louis Armstrong to England to perform on TV but when he arrived he found he was breathing the same broadcasting air as the Whack and Blights (my name for the B&W Minstrels).

When I left school at fifteen I worked as an office boy for Rupert Murdoch's "News Limited of Australia" in Fleet Street, London.

Australia had a racist immigration policy but I was unaware of that at the time. The Aussies had to change their ideas at the beginning of the 1970s because of pressure and influence from the Americans. Black G.I.s had arrived in Australia as part of the Vietnam War effort. As a fifteen year old office boy I began to grow my hair long and I went to see "Hair" the hippy rock musical at Shaftesbury Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue. I also bought the record album of the Broadway cast singing all of the songs. There is one song from that show which you absolutely can't sing unless you're black! The lyrics end up with "President of the United States of Love".

There began to be a thing in the 1970s where some people wanted to know whether you liked black music or white music. I rejected that idea as being some weird kind of cultural apartheid imposed upon music. It got even weirder because they had contrived somehow to class rock and roll as being on the white side of the line(?)!!!

As a teenager I thought we were entering the Age of Aquarius and the whole world would be "peace and love", "harmony and understanding", "no more falsehoods or derisions". I was hopelessly naive.

The first time somebody referred to me as "a white boy" I was offended. I thought it was a serious insult. It took me a few more years to come to the realisation that a belief in love and harmony didn't mean that we would all stop noticing skin colour and be able to consider that to be of no importance. Even by thinking something like that I was unwittingly enjoying privilege.

In 1976, during the hottest summer of the 20th Century, I was working on the Deer Park Road industrial estate in a darkroom for a photography company called Agfa-Gevaert. My job was to open, in the dark, people's rolls of holiday snaps and join them together into one long roll of film which I would then seal up in a metal can and send to the next room in the process to be developed. Every time I emerged from the pitch blackness of the darkroom it was to be blinded by the glaring sunshine of the Europe-wide heat wave.

The boxes of customers' camera films were sent to me down a conveyor system to a small hatch in the side of the darkroom. I never knew who was upstairs sending the boxes down the conveyor. The boxes simply came to the hatch and I took them and performed a monotonous series of actions to prepare them for the next stage in the process.

I'm very clumsy. I have dyspraxia. The process in my daily routine involved manipulating sticky tape and a sharp razor-like blade in the darkness. I kept accidentally cutting my fingertips and then worrying about whether there were bloodstains on people's holiday snaps. I was in darkness so I couldn't see what the undeveloped films looked like. I guessed that they were probably okay because the next stage of the development process would wash the films in a bath of chemicals to develop them.

Then the boxes stopped coming.

There was a long hot time period in the darkness when no boxes came. I was sitting in a pitch black room in the middle of the hottest summer on record with no air conditioning and nothing to do.

Time passed. I was in the dark and the heat with nothing to do. Time passed. Then some more time passed. Then some time passed again.

I began to drum on the desktop with my hands. Bam-bibiddy-bibiddy-bam b-bam-bibiddy-bom-be-bibiddy-ba-ba-ba etc. Then drumming with two ball point pens as drum sticks ta-ta-teh-ta-ta-da-da-diddly-da-te-tah etc. Then back to drumming with my hands, then back to the two ball point pens again. Anything to relieve the boredom of sitting in the dark with nothing to do.

As I sat there drumming away by myself the darkroom curtain was suddenly pulled back and a young black man of about twenty-ish age came rushing angrily into my cubicle. "What's that all about?" He demanded, "What's all that jungle drums about then? What's that supposed to mean, a?"

I stared at him in shock and disbelief. I'd never met him before and he obviously thought that my bored drumming was something to do with him.

He went out again before I could answer.

I continued sitting in the dark. Stunned and confused.

I never saw him again but the boxes had stopped coming down the chute and a few days later I was sacked for "lack of productivity".

I figured that the guy who had come rushing into the cubical complaining about my drumming must have been bullied a lot by racists when he was at school and it had given him a paranoid chip on his shoulder.

There was nothing particularly unusual about getting sacked. I used to go through a lot of jobs in the 70s. Jobs were available but, with my autism and dyspraxia, I just wasn't any good at any of them. I spent much of that decade going from dead-end job to dead-end job. At least the constant change of employer tended to break up the monotony.

At the same time I was still being hypnotised and brainwashed in a pseudo-religious cult called "The Emin Society". One of the group leaders or "Ushers" in that society was calling himself "Aegean" as his special "Emin Name" and he was telling everybody that he believed that the different races and colours of the world "shouldn't mix". He thought that each

different race and ethnicity was channelling a different “frequency” of cosmic force into the Planet Earth and that the different frequencies shouldn’t be mixed. He was never able to entirely explain why he thought these energies shouldn’t be mixed and he strenuously denied being a racist, asserting that he thought all races were equally important to the Mother Earth Planet but that they all had to do their job separately, not mixing. It never made sense and my impression of him was that he had a massive ego (like most of the Emin Ushers) and was just getting carried away on his own imaginative thought process which was leading him further and further into Loonyville.

In the 80s we had the Rock Against Racism movement and we did a lot of campaigning and marching against South African apartheid. When apartheid at last came to an end I reversed my boycott of South African produce and bought as many South African products as I could.

From September 1987 to July 1988 I was in London studying Myths, Legends, Fairy Stories, Dance, Movement and Jungian Psychology at drama school. For the first few months I stayed with Mrs. Obogoh and her teenage son Emeka in a high rise block in Islington. Mrs. Obogoh was a white Welsh woman whose partner, a black Nigerian man, had left some years before.

I slept on the camp bed in the living room and was around as a helpful male presence in their home. Mrs. Obogoh felt that a male presence was important for Emeka’s development. It helped that I had worked with Children’s World Charity, Mendip District Social Services and in Street Youth Club in Somerset. Emeka was obsessed with computer games and sports like football and cricket. He was a bit developmentally challenged and spoke in a rather high pitched voice and was sometimes mistaken for a girl when he spoke on the telephone.

Emeka thought the BBC sitcom “Allo ‘Allo” was hilarious and he particularly loved the references to the “Fallen Madonna with the Big Boobies”. Mrs. Obogoh strongly disapproved and wanted Emeka to realise how evil the Nazis were. He thought they were funny. To be fair to Emeka though, Hollywood director Mel Brooks thinks the Nazis are a joke too. There is a tendency to think that the Nazis are merely historical now. If only we could be sure that something like that would never happen again! But there is no such certainty.

We were keen that Emeka should have some knowledge and appreciation of African culture and history. As much as possible, from ancient stories of Anansi the Spider to modern experimental African films, to music such as Fela Kuti and Manu Dibango, to knowledge of the disastrous effect on African civilisation of European invasions and slavery.

Mrs. Obogoh was active in the Islington Labour Party. When I wasn’t able to find a flat to move to she negotiated me a room in the basement of the house where Chris Smith MP lived. After another few months, I still hadn’t been able to find a London flat. Chris Smith wanted his basement room back so I moved back to live with the Obogohs again. I paid them rent and slept in the living room and continued in that way until my one year drama and movement course was over. Then I moved back to Somerset.

Back in Somerset I worked at Heaven’s Gate Animal Sanctuary near the “Girt Dog” of Langport in the Avalon Zodiac. My secret girlfriend there was Francesca D’Silva whose mother ran the Compassion in World Farming charity and whose father was Asian jazz

guitarist Amancio D'Silva. I say “secret” girlfriend because there were a lot of people working at Heaven’s Gate and there was a lot of sneaking around in the night time. Also, of course, because of my asexuality which tends to render any romance rather academic and non-happyfying.

After Heaven’s Gate I went back to work at Children’s World again. There was a bloke there called Charlie Miller. He kept on doing insulting derogatory Irish jokes and I kept complaining about the nationalistic stereotyping of all Irish as stupid. He would not stop insulting us. The blithering idiot actually believed that he had some kind of God given right to insult races, nationalities and ethnicities with his lousy jokes. Of course, once he knew that I objected, he began deliberately saying provocative things to wind me up. Once I entered a room as he was saying “...especially if it’s a darky one...” and then he lapsed into a grinning silence and stared at me.

In the 1990s I studied Fine Art at the University of Plymouth and achieved a second class honours degree. At the Freshers Fair on day one of the course I was shocked to see that every single student there was white. Gradually over the next three years some different ethnicities became visible amongst the students but I had a definite feeling that Plymouth needed to catch up with diversity. I believe that has now been accomplished (writing in 2024). However, in 1993 there was still a tutor who was telling me that the thing he disliked about my sculpture was that I had mixed a European influence with an African influence and that, apparently, I shouldn’t do that.

At the same time I was an active hunt sab on Saturdays. One of the sabs who I thought was a friend turned out to be racist. It was a huge shock. Her name was Debbie and she lived in the flat upstairs from me in Mount Pleasant Road, Exeter. One day a friend of mine from university, a Chinese (Taiwan) exchange student called Xiao Mai, phoned up the house where I lived and Debbie took the call. I didn’t hear about it for a couple of weeks until Debbie finally got around to telling me that “some foreign person with a weird funny name rang up for you”. Debbie did a cringeey horrible impression of what she thought a Chinese person was supposed to sound like and told me that the message was that Xiao Mai was moving to London. Debbie didn’t bother to write down any details and I never heard from Xiao Mai again. I had a big argument with Debbie and then never spoke to her again.

Sadly I had a second, similar, experience two or three years later when I was friends (or thought I was) with two women hunt sabs from Torquay. They were called Tania and Loraine. Tania was a very fierce and outspoken personality who had previously been in a relationship with Swampy Dan (famous for his tree dwelling and road protest). Loraine was a gothicky type who spoke like a younger version of Mystic Meg, with lots of “Ooh” and “Oh” and side helpings of more “Oooh”.

One night when we’d been to the Exeter Cavern Club and were sitting on a step in Gandy Street Tania suddenly exclaimed that she hated the Jews and the Arabs because of “The way they kill their animals”. I replied that I’m Jewish and I’m a vegan so how can she make such racist blanket statements?

We had an argument and Tan wouldn’t back down and she “apologised” but she was apologising for the wrong thing. Instead of apologising for the racism, antisemitism and

Islamophobia she was apologising for the upset she may have caused by saying it out loud. To make matters worse Loraine joined in by saying “Oooh, Tan, he wouldn’t like our “wog” jokes then would he?” And I never spoke to either of them ever again, not even when walking straight past them at a demo.

So now I’m in the Twenty-First Century and I’m being told that all those post-hippy attitudes of mine, which led to me being called “politically correct gone mad” in the 80s and 90s, are now evidence that I am “woke”.

I am delighted to hear it!